

Teaching Nonfiction through Rhetorical Reading

Lamb offers strategies for helping students understand the “constructedness” of nonfiction texts, which can enhance their literacy skills.

The need to teach students strategies for handling the various nonfiction texts they encounter has never been more pressing than in our digital age. Each semester, my first-year college students refer to the nonfiction essays we read as “stories,” as in “this story is about how annoying cell phones are.” I’m always struck by their fictionalization of all writing, especially since many people complain that students no longer read literature. At the same time, news and political media, both digital and print, have taken a turn toward the narrative, “human interest” approach, and first-person accounts are often the sole evidence provided for claims. As Naomi Wolf argues, “‘Soft media’ such as call-in radio shows and talk shows [have] superseded establishment forums as the source from which people get their politics” (88). Television, according to Barry Brummett, is “highly concerned with that which is small, personal, and person-oriented” (142). Issues on television are all portrayed in personal terms rather than abstract, analytical terms (143). Add to this phenomenon blogs, Facebook, YouTube, and the multitude of Internet genres in which everyone posts a “story” for others to read. Growing up in this digital age, students have a tenuous grasp on the differences between fiction and nonfiction, which can result in a lack of critical thinking about important political and cultural issues.

Teaching students to distinguish among fiction and nonfiction genres, then, and to understand the strategies used in nonfiction, would help them

understand the “constructedness,” in Bruce Pirie’s terminology, of both fiction and nonfiction. By “constructedness” Pirie means teaching students that texts are (1) created by people within cultural situations; (2) circulated by various institutions; and (3) received and used in various ways (24–26). This knowledge will help students become more actively involved in their professional and private literacy practices. Indeed, recent pedagogical scholarship has aimed at making students active readers of fiction (i.e., Blau; Holden and Schmit; Yancey), but there is less discussion of teaching nonfiction genres. These strategies are crucial for many reasons, not the least of which is that students are constantly faced with nonfiction genres, including their textbooks, editorials, blogs, informational websites, business writing, and instruction manuals. Another type of nonfiction needs students’ attention precisely because it lies between fiction and fact. This type of nonfiction includes editorials, op-ed pieces, and creative nonfiction. This “opinionated” nonfiction requires complex reading skills, and in this article, I concentrate on *how* students read rather than *what* they read by offering strategies for approaching this type of nonfiction. I will also suggest some nonfiction essays I have found to be engaging and successful with young adults.

Pushing Past the “Intentional Fallacy”

One of the main differences between teaching fiction and nonfiction is our focus on the intent of the author/writer. In fiction, if we search for or attribute

intent, we commit the “intentional fallacy,” though much reader-response criticism in the 1980s thankfully liberated us from this constraint. However, while readers’ responses have been privileged in post–New Critical classrooms for the past few decades, authors’ possible intentions are still often treated as a distraction that prevents students from fully appreciating the text and its “literariness.” There are cultural, historical, and other contextual ways to read literature, but most often, we are rightly frustrated when students bring in irrelevant details about the author’s or their own life to justify an interpretation unsupported by the text. Thus, I realize I’m in dangerous territory when I suggest that in reading nonfiction, students might benefit from returning to the idea of the author’s intent or the “purpose” for writing, but there are useful—indeed crucial—reasons for doing so if students are to appreciate nonfiction fully.

The type of reading I’m advocating, and which I have found remarkably useful, is rhetorical reading, a special type of reading that simultaneously focuses students’ attention on both the author’s purpose and the text. Although my experience

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teaching these strategies has been mostly in postsecondary classes, many of these techniques can be applied productively to high school students. In fact, in developing these strategies I drew on my experience teaching high school to create activities that would transition young adults into the type of critical reading and analytical writing required in college.

Rhetorical reading focuses on the context of the material and the aims of the writer (Bean, Chappell, and Gillam; Haas; Haas and Flower). Most importantly, it focuses not just on *what* the author is saying but also on *how* the author is saying it. “When readers read rhetorically,” notes Christina Haas, “they use or infer situational information—about the author, about the texts’ historical and cultural context, about the motives and desires of the writer—to aid in understanding the text and to judge the quality and

believability of the argument put forth in it” (24). Haas contrasts rhetorical reading with the strategies students bring to college, strategies that read texts as “bodies of information or collections of facts, rather than as complex social and rhetorical acts” (24). Rhetorical reading, on the other hand, requires interpretation about “the author’s identity and ‘agenda,’ the response of other readers to the argument, [and] other texts with similar or diverse perspectives” (24).

When engaged in rhetorical reading, students go beyond just the content of the material, though comprehension of content is a necessary first step. Instead, they analyze the material as they read. Doug Brent explains that “the process of reading is not just the interpretation of a text but the interpretation of another person’s worldview as presented by a text” (28). To learn to read with these two aims in mind, both content and strategy, students must learn to modulate their reading strategies according to the genre so they can learn to assess the author’s “worldview” in the text.

Though these strategies are applicable to a range of nonfiction genres, I have discovered specific traits in nonfiction essays that successfully engage first-year students. These essays are relevant to current topics, short (10–20 paragraphs long), have ample detail and evidence open to interpretation, and they engage in effective, unique stylistic choices. Students see these essays as accessible and even something they could write. These essays were originally published in such newspapers and magazines as the *New York Times*, *Outside*, *Life*, *People*, *Science News*, *Technology Review*, and the *New Yorker*, and they were published as parts of longer works aimed at general, not scholarly, audiences. Essays that I’ve used include Sandra Baron, “R We D8ting?”; Bruce Bower, “Growing Up Online: Young People Jump Headfirst into the Internet’s World”; Stephanie Coontz, “The American Family”; Annie Dillard, “Living Like Weasels”; Martin Luther King Jr., “I Have a Dream”; Jonathan Rowe, “Reach Out and Annoy Someone”; Eric Schlosser, “Why McDonald’s Fries Taste So Good”; Peter Stark, “As Freezing Persons Recollect the Snow—First Chill—Then Stupor—Then the Letting Go”; and Alice Walker, “Am I Blue?” The following strategies will help students engage these types of essays by teaching rhetorical reading.

Nonfiction Response Writing

One of the most effective ways to teach students to respond to reading is to have them annotate the text, which is admittedly difficult when students are using the school's textbook. In lieu of writing in the book itself, teachers can encourage students to use sticky notes that can be removed later. These notes come in various types, including a clear type one can write over.

Another strategy for students is to take notes on the material by outlining the text, writing questions they have, and listing the author's main ideas. Have students note material for each of these questions: "What did I already know? What surprised me? What do I agree with? What do I disagree with?" John C. Bean, Virginia A. Chappell, and Alice M. Gillam discuss the useful "descriptive outline," helpful for in-depth understanding of an essay. Borrowing from Kenneth Bruffee's *A Short Course in Writing*, they suggest writing "does" and "says" statements for each paragraph or section. They explain that "the *does* statement identifies a paragraph's or section's function or purpose, while the *says* statement summarizes the content of the same stretch of text" (55; italics in original). Note that the *does* statement comments on the purpose of the paragraph, such as "offers an anecdote to illustrate the point" or "summarizes the previous section" (55).

Other responses to nonfiction help focus students' thinking on a topic. Try the following from John C. Bean:

- "A letter to the writer responding to what you read" (92);
- "A reading log or reading journal" (109–110);
- "A thesis-seeking essay in which you pose a problem and explain your thinking process as you research and try to solve the problem" (92);
- "A reflection paper or reader-response paper in which you make connections between the reading and your experience" (93); or
- "A dialogue or conversation among people with opposing views" (110).

These informal strategies demystify the reading process for students and are especially useful when applied to nonfiction.

Structured Summary Writing

Another strategy for teaching students to read nonfiction rhetorically is by writing a summary. By far the most effective strategy I've found thus far for helping students learn to read nonfiction is the Rhetorical Reading Response, which includes a four-sentence *précis*, developed by Margaret K. Woodworth, and described in Bean, Chappell, and Gillam as "listening as you reread" (54). These tightly structured summaries require of students an analytical type of reading, and the genre provides practice for writing longer position papers, literature reviews, researched position papers, and other nonfiction genres. Woodworth explains this response as a way to "reinforce learning in [English] courses and to further the specific goals in interdisciplinary writing instruction: helping students learn to read and listen to what others have to say with greater comprehension, to question and evaluate what they read and hear, and to write and speak with control and conviction—in our own classes, in other classes, and beyond the classroom" (156). Figure 1 shows a version of a Rhetorical Reading Response that I often use with first-year writing students, but that would be helpful for high school students writing about nonfiction essays.

Typically, students find these *précis* and Rhetorical Reading Responses difficult to write at first. Teachers should emphasize to students that although the assignment is short, usually no more than one page long, the responses are not "one-draft" essays. Instead, students discover that they must draft, reread, and revise several times to capture the exact meaning. This focused attention to the text is one benefit of the assignment for students. Woodworth encourages teaching each sentence of the *précis* separately, using large- and small-group discussions (158–59). Note, too, that the brevity of this assignment makes these responses relatively easy to grade, unlike lengthier papers, but the assignment still requires students to engage in rhetorical reading, critical thinking, and multiple revisions.

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FIGURE 1. Rhetorical Reading Response

The purpose of this assignment is to encourage rhetorical reading and writing. Rhetorical reading calls attention to the author's intentions on readers and focuses on how texts work to change readers' minds. As you read, you're not just learning about the world; rather, you're learning about the author's worldview demonstrated in the text.

Reading:

1. Do a fast preview of the text for as much information as possible—length, complexity, original publication context, author, time required to read it thoroughly, etc.
2. Slowly and carefully read the essay; take marginal notes so you'll remember your reactions (or use sticky notes). Jot down any questions you have.

Writing:

1. Write a rhetorical *précis* in your own words (with no words borrowed directly from the text):
 - a. **Sentence 1:** Name of author, genre, and title of work, date in parentheses; a rhetorically active verb (such as *claims*, *argues*, *asserts*, *defines*, *explores*, or *suggests*); and a "that" clause containing the major assertion, main idea, or thesis statement in the work.
 - b. **Sentence 2:** An explanation of how the author develops and supports the thesis (i.e., evidence), usually in chronological order.
 - c. **Sentence 3:** A statement of the author's apparent purpose, followed by an "in order to" phrase.
 - d. **Sentence 4:** A description of the intended audience and/or the relationship the author establishes with the audience.
2. Write your response to the text. Are you confused? Annoyed? Delighted? Tickled? Do you agree?
3. Write an analytical paragraph about the text in which you make an interpretive claim about the text and support it. Use plenty of examples from the text, citing as appropriate. (Use a question from the book if you need an idea.)

Format:

Academic; be concise and analytical. Choose words carefully, and revise sentences to include the most meaning for the syntax. Type your responses; aim for one page long.

Tip:

Keep these responses on your computer or a hard copy since these will become the basis of papers. This takes time—academic writing requires one to read, process, and write about source texts—but rest assured, the skills and habits you form will help you in this and other classes.

Students may also have difficulty with the form, and some might feel quite constrained by it. For these reasons, teachers should demonstrate the variations possible in the format. Woodworth suggests: "Once students have mastered the form, they are heartily encouraged to create other, less rigid forms to accommodate the information" (157). The following are examples of the first paragraph, the *précis*:

Example 1: Derek Bok, in the editorial "Protecting Freedom of Expression at Harvard" (1991), argues that even private institutions such as Harvard should protect free speech. He supports his thesis by giving examples of expression at Harvard, developing reasons for his claims, and explaining Supreme Court rulings. Bok hopes to arouse sympathy for freedom of expression in order to motivate faculty, students, and others to protect it. His audience is the Harvard community, but also other members of private institutions who might think the First Amendment doesn't apply to them.

Example 2: In the editorial, "Protecting Freedom of Expression at Harvard" (1991), Derek Bok claims that we shouldn't censor people's expression of offensive views just because they're offensive. He uses logical reasoning and offers a variety of reasons and examples for his view, including his interpretation of Supreme Court rulings and Harvard situations. Bok's purpose is to suggest alternatives to censorship, such as ignoring it, speaking to the person, and trying to get them to understand it in order to curb the rate of offensive speech. His audience is the Harvard community and others concerned about both protecting freedom of speech and creating fair, just, and sensitive communities.

Each *précis* captures the essence of the content and structure of the essay, but the sentences vary syntactically, so students have some room for variations. At the same time, the form is beneficial because it requires students to engage in concentrated critical reading and orient themselves to nonfiction in new ways.

Another challenge for students is that while writing a *précis* might seem easy because it's short, it nonetheless requires students to grasp the overall purpose and genre of the work, instead of reading for literal information to answer a comprehension question. Many students are not accustomed to thinking about texts this way. Indeed, many are

used to reading simply for the answers to questions and are unskilled at reading whole essays and constructing meaning from them. For example, I've found that in the first sentence, students often write, "the author *talks about* cell phone technology," which indicates a tenuous understanding of the purposes of various nonfiction essays and does little more than name the topic of the essay (which often can be gleaned from simply reading the essay's title). Thus, teachers must provide direct instruction in how to detect the aim or purpose in an essay. I have found success through reading sample essays and discussing their aims. Next, provide students with examples of "rhetorically active verbs" that help them express the essay's aim. These include *argues*, *claims*, *asserts*, *discusses*, *describes*, *interprets*, *speculates*, *compares*, *implies*, *contemplates*, *wonders*, *explains*, etc., which indicate the essay's purpose.¹ For students to choose such a verb accurately, they must understand the difference between *explaining* and *arguing*, and writing these responses helps them learn various types of nonfiction genres.

The third, analytical paragraph is also quite difficult for students, but since it's only one paragraph, they get useful practice in stating a claim, finding textual evidence, and citing correctly. Students have problems creating the topic sentence, which is in essence an answer to an interpretive question. I often provide the question to students in the beginning of the semester, but as they grow more adept, I have them create their own claim (topic sentence, or TS). Writing effective topic sentences for Rhetorical Reading Responses requires that students modulate their reading and writing into a register beyond simply reading for content. However, on their first attempts, some students merely resummaries the essay, as in the following "claims" about an essay on dating via the Internet:

TS1: Facebook, MySpace, and other social networking sites are the big parts in connecting with the younger generation that are called generation @. [This is followed by a summary/description of the essay.]

TS2: A different side of the technology that has become the norm in this day and time are blogs and chatting over the Internet.

TS3: The technology of cell phones has made dating and relationships less personal.



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Another problem some students have in writing Rhetorical Reading Responses is that they tend to state a claim about their opinion of the material, not the author's strategies. The ability to state and support a claim is crucial, but often students do this without first fully understanding the text. Elizabeth A. Flynn describes reading as "a confrontation between self and 'other'" (267). She writes: "Text and reader are necessarily foreign to each other in some ways, and so the exchange between them involves an imbalance" (267–68). She cites George Poulet, who notes that "It all happens, then, as though reading were the act by which a thought managed to bestow itself within me with a subject not myself" (qtd. in Flynn 268). She extends this observation and notices that "[t]he reader can resist the alien thought or subject and so remain essentially unchanged by the reading experience. In this case the reader dominates the text" (268). In her students, Flynn observes this "dominant pole" is "characterized by detachment, observation from a distance" (268). Note that the following

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description of “dominant” reading sounds similar to many teachers’ complaints about students’ analyses: “The reader imposes a previously established structure on the text and in so doing silences it. . . . Readers

who dominate texts become complacent or bored because the possibility for learning has been greatly reduced. Judgment is based on previously established norms rather than on empathetic engagement with and critical evaluation of the new material” (Flynn 268). Having students write Rhetorical Reading Responses interrupts this “detachment”

from the text and requires students to enter, for a moment, into another’s world. The following writing samples could indicate “dominant” readings or application of their preconceived ideas about the issue before they fully understand the author’s “worldview.”

TS1: I haven’t spent much time thinking about technology, but I agree that some of it makes our relationships less personal. [*This is followed by examples from the student’s experience.*]

TS2: I also have some interest in the role that literacy plays in society.

TS3: Based on the Rowe essay, I believe that cell phones are more than a “mere annoyance,” and more of a problem.

It is not that these interpretive claims are unimportant; students do need to know how to support their opinions with evidence. Yet, Rhetorical Reading Responses teach them to make a discriminating judgment, an evaluation, about how the material is presented *before* they reach a position on the material itself. This strategy helps prevent the problem of students jumping to conclusions, seeing only what they already believe, and dismissing opposing views before considering them.

Rhetorical reading encourages students to comprehend the text and make sense of the author’s purpose and context. It fosters the kind of relationship with texts that most of us hope our students will develop. In Flynn’s words, this is when “the self and other, reader and text, interact in such a way

that the reader learns from the experience without losing critical distance; reader and text interact with a degree of mutuality. Foreignness is reduced, though not eliminated. Self and other remain distinct and so create a kind of dialogue” (268). The following claims finally begin to get at the distinction between arguing students’ opinions and arguing about the authors’ strategies:

TS1: According to Rowe, cell phones are more than a “mere annoyance” because they disconnect people and their face-to-face communication with each other.

TS2: Goodman uses statistical analysis to support her argument to build her credibility with the audience and prove she understands her subject.


TS3: Rowe’s argument depends on a few assumptions that may not be true.

TS4: I don’t know anything about the author, but based on this essay, I would guess he was involved in the news media.

Each of these claims could easily be followed by *for example* and textual evidence that requires students to make evaluative claims about not only the content but also the strategies in the essay. Each of the samples above demonstrates that students are engaged in reading on a more critical level, one that reads beyond the content alone, but also into the strategies of the writer.

The Benefits of Reading Nonfiction Rhetorically

The benefits of these responses are numerous. While they are relatively easy for teachers to grade, rhetorical reading responses require from students more complex reading and writing strategies than do many other short responses. Students learn to create claims and build textual cases. They can provide content for class discussions, as these *précis* can be compared, discussed, and revised in class. Woodworth explains, “summarizing significantly improves reading comprehension and recall” (156), so writing a *précis* is also useful as a writing-to-learn activity done in class. *Précis* also provide teachers with an accurate way to gauge both whether students have read and precisely what they have un-

derstood, since students often leave out of a summary the material they don't understand. By comparing a class's set of responses, teachers can assess the points that need explaining. Most importantly, these responses require students to begin recognizing the various types of nonfiction genres and to evaluate various claims and methods. In this way, they are learning, in Paulo Freire's terms, how to read the "world and the word" (qtd. in Berthoff 119), or put another way, to read the world *through* the word. Nonfiction accounts for much of our cultural conversation, and students should be taught strategies for not only "listening" to, but also entering into, this cultural conversation. 

Note

1. Lists of these are often included in grammar/writing handbooks in the section on researched writing, and are sometimes called "lead-in verbs" or "introductory verbs" for borrowed material.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

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